

STEREO INTENDED FOR USE
ON EITHER STEREO OR
MONAURAL PHONOGRAPHS

CAEDMON
TC 1234

MARK TWAIN LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI

READ BY ED BEGLEY



33 1/3 RPM Longplaying

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Selections from "Cub" Wants to Be a Pilot, A "Cub" Pilot's Experience;
or; Learning the River and The Continued Perplexities of Cub Piloting.

Timing: 54 min. 58 sec.



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Capture a childhood dream—of scaling a mountain, sailing an ocean, soaring in flight—and often at the point of accomplishment experience disillusionment. This irony in achievement is part of the human experience. For Mark Twain, the irony was experienced when he captured his childhood dream of becoming a Mississippi riverboat pilot. In the process of mastering the river, he found it losing its grace, beauty, and poetry. This irony is revealed as clearly as the unexpected turns of the river and the recreation of a past era in this reading from Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*.

Originally published in 1875 under the title "Old Times on the Mississippi," the selections on this recording recall the pre-Civil War days when life on the Mississippi seemed to epitomize the vitality and excitement of an expanding nation. These "Old Times" sections are regarded by critics as the best of *Life on the Mississippi*, capturing with a creative memory the river experiences that were so important to Twain's development as a person and as a writer.

"S-t-e-a-m-boat a-comin!" says Twain early in the passages. With those words a whole town stirred and the imaginations of every young boy turned to the gaudy dreams of what a riverboat man's life must be. Having a job of any kind on a steamboat would do, but being pilot was best. Twain himself realized that ambition when, for one and a half years during 1857-58, he was apprenticed to Horace Bixby; and for two and a half years thereafter he practiced as a licensed pilot. Commenting on these four years of steamboat experience, Twain once wrote, "I got personally and familiarly acquainted with all the different types of human nature that are to be found in fiction, biography or history."

In the "Old Times" passages on this recording, Twain focuses on the nature and consequences of the learning experience itself. The accomplishment of becoming a pilot was not easily won. What appeared to be the most casual of skills—learning the river—was, in fact, a technical process of perseverance and measured assimilation. Under the stern tutelage of Bixby, young Twain had to learn every town, point, bar, island, bend, reach, and snag along the river, as well as what lay beneath it. And to his dismay he found that the shape and dimension of the river, once "learned", was ever-changing.

Twain shows us the unrelenting Bixby trying to instruct his reluctant pupil—eager to learn but unwilling to work at it. It is from the juxtaposition of the experienced Bixby and the naive young Twain that the "Old Times" passages derive much of their humor, tutor and student regarding each other with incredulity and exasperation.

Despite his trials and momentary humiliations, Twain did accomplish the seemingly impossible mastery of the river, but mastery was not without irony. The romance of the river, so earnestly sought, yielded by necessity to realism. The Mississippi sunset that once was a bewitching sight of "speechless rapture" became instead a useful phenomenon by which to gauge the safe piloting of a steamboat. The poetry and glamour that had attracted him to the river faded as his familiarity with it increased.

Twain brings to these passages an informal, effortless, and unobtrusive artistry. He displays his mastery of the yarn-spinning style, alternating narrative and descriptive passages with dialogue, always conscious of the sounds of words and of the tempo and rhythm of sentences in creating a mood or underscoring a theme. Twain knew and practiced the art of the speaker and throughout his career wrote with an ear for the spoken word. It is this particular quality in his writing that makes the "Old Times" passages from *Life on the Mississippi* so appropriate for recorded interpretation.

Unquestionably the river was what Twain knew and wrote about best. Contrary to what one might guess from hearing these selections, his apprenticeship on the river was not during his teenage years but rather in his early twenties when his perceptions were keener. And the writing of "Old Times" came still twenty years later, with maturity tempering his earlier recollections. It is this background that accounts for the tone Twain brings to these passages. Despite the persona of a naive cub pilot and the continual infusing of humor, he writes of memories that are bittersweet, of innocence that is lost with regret, of the Mississippi as a symbol of life that is at once romantic and disillusioning—and in the process he has given us a remarkable, personalized portrait of an era.

John T. Ridley,
Master of Arts in Teaching,
Harvard University

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MARK TWAIN



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STEREO
INTENDED FOR USE ON EITHER STEREO OR MONAURAL PHONOGRAPHS

Mark Twain
LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI
(Selections)
read by Ed Begley

TC 1234-A

Side 1

23:33

Beginning

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LONG PLAYING · 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ RPM · MICROGROOVE

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STEREO

Mark Twain
LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI
(Selections)
read by Ed Begley

TC 1234-B

Side 2

26:26

Conclusion

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